

He Knew All the World's Most Prominent

Men, But It Was Hard to Convince

the People in Town.

CAMERA JOE

BY
WILLIAM SLAVENS
McNUTT

WHEN Joe Kelly was ten years old he was as dirty and tough as any kid of his age in the dirty, tough middle western manufacturing town on the banks of the Mississippi in which he lived.

He was the last and most neglected of the ten children who kept Peter Kelly, the freight brakeman, and his wife in debt and other trouble.

One summer day, at a picnic of the McHenry Plow Works Employees' Association, at Sutler's Grove, he saw Pete Molesky, a boy of his own age, with a small black box in his hand.

"What you got?" Joe inquired.

"Cameras," Pete replied.

"How'd you get it?" he asked wistfully.

"Bought it," said Pete. "Where'd you suppose?"

"Bought it!" Joe repeated incredulously. "Where'd you get the money to buy one of them?"

"Cuttin' lawns," said Pete.

The starter's pistol spoke, the runner leaped away, and Pete snapped the shutter of his camera.

"They don't cost much," he admitted. "A little one like this one I got is only \$3; that's all."

Joe trailed home with Pete after the picnic and, fascinated, watched him remove the film from the black box in the dim light from the red-shaded lamp and wash it in a pan of developer. When the job was done, Pete held the film up, and Joe saw, fixed upon it, the scene he had witnessed in the afternoon in Sutler's Grove—the starter with the pistol raised, the runners leaping away from the mark. They were bad negatives, but to Joe Kelly they were the evidence of a miracle performed before his eyes.

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THE next morning Joe was up and dressed before breakfast was ready. He ate hurriedly, rushed from the house, and ran across town to what was known as the nice residence district. By nightfall he had earned 50 cents.

He got home too late for supper, went directly to bed, and thought the matter out. At the rate he was going, it would take him five more days to amass the \$8 necessary to buy a little camera like Pete Molesky's. In the heat of his sudden overwhelming desire, five days seemed identical in length with 5,000,000 years, in that it was utterly impossible for him to wait that long.

Shortly after midnight he slipped out of bed and dressed. He slipped out of the house unheard and headed for the business section of the town.

At 1 o'clock a policeman cornered him in Knowlton's drug store.

"How'd you get in here?" the policeman asked.

Joe indicated a small broken transom over a high door in the rear. "Through that," he said.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Lookin' for one of them cameras things you take pictures with," said Joe.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Take pictures with it," Joe explained simply.

"I guess you won't need anything to take pictures with for a few years," said the policeman. "Judge Garvey'll send you to a place where you won't have any time to be taking pictures."

Then and then only Joe Kelly behaved like a very good boy.

In the history of the reform school to which he was sent, Joe Kelly's behavior stands as the record for good conduct.

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At the expiration of one year he was released on parole.

It took him nine days to amass the needed sum.

He didn't take the outfit home. He took it to a vine-masked cave in the side of a cliff on the river bank. He deposited his developing material there, set a roll of film in the camera, and returned to town.

All day long he wandered around with the box under his arm, but he did not take a picture. Early the next morning he started again. An intoxicated farmer was kicked out of Cutler's saloon. He got up to his feet and began cursing loudly. A policeman hurried up and arrested him. The befuddled farmer resisted in a futile drunken way. A crowd gathered. In the front line of the crowd was Joe Kelly. He clicked the shutter of his camera for the first time.

It was a week before he used the camera again, although he carried it with him all the while. Then he made five pictures of various athletic events at a picnic at Sutler's Grove.

Gradually Little Joe Kelly and his box became the subject of humorous comment about town. Some one called him "Camera Joe," and the name stuck. He discovered that there were cameras he had that would make better pictures, and started in to make money enough to get one.

Whenever anything happened in town Joe was there, to take a picture of it. Policemen chased him and cuffed him when he got in their way at the small riots that occurred when the employees of the plow works were on strike. Firemen stumbled over him and cursed him whenever there was a blaze.

When Joe was fourteen he got a job in the plow works and continued to spend all his spare time and money on his hobby. In the spring of his seventeenth year the big flood came.

Old Mississippi kicked up his heels, put his tail in the air and went on a rampage. The town in which Joe lived was inundated and cut off from communication with the outside world for two days and nights. They were days and nights of terror, death and destruction, and during those days and nights Camera Joe Kelly was busy as he had never before been busy in his life. He began taking pictures with the beginning of the flood. As the waters rose he salvaged his outfit from his home, carried it through the streets on the rapidly rising flood in a rowboat to a four-story stone and steel building in the center of the town and established himself in a deserted law office on the top floor. From there he salled

forth and took pictures while the flood raged. At night he went out in his boat, constantly menaced by the swift-drifting wreckage that swirled about him, and took flashlights.

On the morning of the third day he was taking a picture of the wreckage in Main street when a tall, bored-looking young stranger with a big camera slung over his shoulder stopped and spoke to him.

"Who you with?" said the stranger.

"What?" said Joe, not understanding.

The stranger's eyes brightened.

"You local?" he asked.

Joe stared. It was all Greek to him.

"Are you a photographer?" the stranger said impatiently.

Joe nodded.

"Got any good pictures of the flood?"

"Sure," said Joe. "Lots of 'em."

"Sell them?" asked the stranger.

"Sell 'em!" exclaimed Joe. "Sure! You want to buy 'em?"

"Let's see them," said the stranger.

"Where are they? Come on; I'm in a hurry!"

Joe led him to the law office on the top floor of the stone building where he had camped during the disaster and showed him the prints and plates he had made. The stranger was almost hysterical with delight as he went through the collection. "What'll you take for 'em—all of 'em?" he said excitedly.

"What'll you gimme?" Joe countered, amazed.

"Two hundred for the lot," said the stranger. "All you've got; every negative and print you've made while the flood was on. What do you say, kid?" Talk quick!"

"Sure," said Joe stupidly. "Sure thing!"

The stranger stripped the money from a leather roll, handed it to Joe and began wrapping up the collection, muttering excitedly to himself the while.

"What's your name, kid?" he said as he prepared to depart.

Joe told him.

"What you with here in town?"

"The McHenry Plow Works," Joe replied.

"Plow works?" the stranger exclaimed. "Come on along with me and I'll get you a regular job!"

"What doin'?" said Joe.

"Photographing, you fool!" said the stranger. "Come on, talk quick! I got to be moving!"

"Sure!" said Joe.

"Come ahead," said the stranger.

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A BREATHLESS scramble on foot and by boat out of the devastated town, a hair-raising dash in an automobile, a short wait at a station, and then the warmth and luxury of the Chicago express. Then through a crowded station to a taxi-cab, a rush across town, a trip up nine flights in an elevator, and Anna Joe Kelly entered for the first time the surroundings in which he belonged—the artroom of a big city newspaper.

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Judge Garvey committed him to the reform school until he was twenty-one, explaining to him that he might be released on parole sooner if he proved to be a very good boy.

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wonder at his question. "Why, of course," she said simply.

Joe laughed and squeezed her arm. "You ain't a bad little gal," he said.

"Not half bad."

THEY walked together in the deepening dusk, and Joe talked to her; talked of places where he had

easily forgotten. The President, standing on the rear platform of the shiny special, spied him and smiled. He not only remembered his face, but he remembered his name. "Hello, Joe!" he called to him, cordially. "Where have you been? We've missed you. I was asking some of the boys about you just the other day."

was next in line. He took Joe by the arm and spoke to him in a low voice.

"We all owe you an apology, Mr.

Kelly," he said solemnly. "We are

mighty glad to have you here in town. If you'd consider opening a

photographer's shop here in Miller-

town, Mr. Kelly, I'm sure we could

arrange to let you have the money

for it.

We ought to have a photog-

rapher here. We're big enough.

And a man like you, a man with your ex-

perience and reputation—"

Joe raised his eyes and looked at the banker.

"You take your hands off my arm," he said in a level voice.

"You low-down, corn-fed, hay-pitchin'

piker, you! Take your hand off my arm an' get out o' reach o' me, or I'll hang you on your jaw that'll bend you lop-sided."

As the banker backed away, Mr. Potter approached, grinning, nervous, conciliatory. "Well, Joe—" he began in a fawning tone, and got no further.

Joe reached into his pocket, brought forth the money the manager had left him, peeled off several bills, crumpled them in a wad in the palm of his hand, and flung it in Potter's face.

"That's all I owe you, an' then some," he snarled.

"If you think I'm grateful to you, you're crazy! You let me into your house when I was all busted up because Jennie talked you into it, and you let me stay there because she promised to take care o' me, while she was doin' all the rest of the dirty work around your place for nothin' but a lot o' cross words an' mean looks! I don't owe you nothing now but a poke in the snoot, and if you don't back away from me quick, I'll pay you that!"

He spoke, then, to the crowd in general.

"You're a bunch o' hicks," he said scornfully. "I come into your town down an' out an' all busted up, an' you give me the horse laugh. Well, here's the horse laugh back at you. I'm gonna back home where I come from. Back to my old job, an' back there the only place where we ever see people like you in the funny papers. Funny! That's what you are, the whole bunch o' you. Just funny!"

He searched the crowd with his eye and he found Jennie Potter, walked over to her and took her by the arm.

"Come on, kid," he said grandly.

"You're the only regular guy in town!

Come up with me to your uncle's old barn that's still a house, while I pack up my stuff."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Joe said gently.

"Go way!" she commanded angrily.

Suddenly her wrath forsook her; she collapsed on the couch, shaking with sobs. "Oh, oh, what did you come back for?" she wept. "I didn't mean to cry. Please go away, please please!"

"Well, I'll be damned," Joe repeated to himself and walked softly out.

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HE went slowly down the street and entered the post office. He was in there addressing a letter to the train to Chicago, whistled in, stopped, started and whistled out again. Joe dropped the letter in the box, walked across the street to the Farmers' Bank.

Henry Stonington, the president,

rose from his seat behind the desk in the corner with an air of alarm.

"It's all right," said Joe soothingly.